



Access to Mental Health Services Study Committee

October 11, 2018

Dear Honorable Legislators,

I wish to bring to your attention information and suggestion for your consideration.

Early this year I started meeting with a concerned citizen who experienced the horrors of a suicide in her family. She is naturally concerned and anxious to help reduce suicide in South Dakota. Being a reasonable person and knowing the immensity of the problem she is wisely eating this elephant one bite at a time. The first bite is to ensure that we have more accurate suicide reporting. Our feeling is that suicide is likely under recorded in South Dakota. More accurate reporting and data collection can lead to many benefits including identifying high-risk groups and targeting preventative programs and interventions.

To learn more about suicide identification and reporting we met with Dr. Kenneth S. Snell M.D. He is our Minnehaha County Coroner and Medical Examiner. He is one of only two forensic pathologists in SD and is also responsible for training of Coroners in Eastern SD.

A few things we learned that I want to share with you:

1. South Dakota's definition of Suicide "22-16-36 Suicide defined. Suicide is the intentional taking of one's own Life." Due to the difficulties of determining "intentional" it is likely that suicides are under reported. This is especially a concern for coroners with limited training in a smaller community where the stigma of a suicide makes it difficult to make the suicide call.
 - a. I am attaching an article provide by Dr. Snell which comes from the CDC and defines this concern and helps explain how a simple change to our definition to allow "implicit" intention of causing death may help in correctly identifying suicide deaths.
2. While South Dakota does have a standardized Death Certificate we do not have a standardized State-wide Coroner's Report. This complicates and impedes data gathering and analysis. We should support efforts to have a State-wide standard form.
 - a. In September, the CDC announced that SD will be one of ten remaining states to join the National Violent Death Reporting System and is receiving funds to make this possible. I have spoken to Colleen Winter in SD Dept. of Health who is active in this implementation. We as a legislature should be supportive of this effort. I believe it will lead to some standardization of coroner reports and better understanding of this issue.
3. The State could benefit from a "Suicide Death Review Panel". This panel would probably need to be designated a public health authority and given some HIPAA protection as such. However, such a group could greatly assist us in understanding our suicide epidemic and how to address it.
4. Concerns about HIPAA has caused a group that was previously reviewing Child Deaths in SD to suspend activities. We should work to provide some liability protection for authorized groups

that are working on public health policy issues. I have asked Wenzel Cummings to look at how this may be done in other states.

5. Coroners in SD should receive some level of training in the identification of suicide and the importance of its reporting. Dr. Snell is very open to this for Eastern SD in 2019.

I know that the scope of your committee's work is massive and I sincerely thank you for your time and effort. I hope that my thoughts on this one aspect are helpful. Please feel free to contact me with questions, concerns or comments.

Best regards

Wayne